Military-Media Relations: One Officer's Perspective

by Lieutenant Colonel Michael S. Galloucis, US Army

One of Army Chief of Public Affairs Major General John G. Meyer's favorite phrases is "The media are like alligators. . . . We don't have to like them, but we do have to feed them." That is, we must ensure the media have heard and understand the Army's position.

A reporter will file a story or air a news report on television or radio with or without the Army's input. There is a much higher likelihood of getting the Army's side of a story told if we invest time and effort in getting to know the media. We have no one to blame but ourselves if we do not talk with the media and later are dissatisfied with the outcome. Of course, this premise implies that all reporters, all news organizations and all articles and news clips are fair and balanced. We all know this is not the case. However, if we are not willing to tell our side of the story, we must accept what, inevitably, will be the negative consequences.

Engagement Strategy

The best strategy for dealing with the media is an "engagement" strategy that focuses on routine interaction regardless of what is happening in the world or in the Army. This engagement strategy could be likened to dollar-cost averaging, which basically means an investor routinely invests the same amount of money regardless of what the stock market is doing. This is a sound, long-term strategy for accruing capital. Maintaining a long-term engagement strategy with the media will also produce capital—not in terms of dollars but in benefits to the Army.

Career Army officers are used to "hitting" for a high "batting average"—to use a sports analogy. Officers do not get to a field grade by batting .500. Successful Army officers hit about .900. That is, nine out of 10 times, most career officers do great work and do what the Army considers to be the right thing. With the media, we must have realistic expectations on what constitutes success. If you hit .500, that *is* success with the media. You will have balanced coverage, and both sides of the story will be told. If you expect to hit .900 with the media, you will be disappointed every time. We must come to grips with this reality.

The Army needs to set realistic expectations and strive for factual and accurate reporting as the benchmark. All too often, officers become angry when they read a less-than-favorable news report about the Army. We must get over this knee-jerk reaction and ask the more important question: Is the less-than-flattering portrayal true? If it is, then we need to let it go. If it is not true, we should immediately strive to correct the fault.

Headlines frequently upset those in uniform. The basic facts are that the reporter does not write the headline, and the main purpose of the headline is to draw attention. It serves as a "grabber." Headlines are created to be provocative and frequently sensationalize the trivial. What is important is the story beneath the headline; if it is accurate and balanced, we should be "happy campers." If not, we should provide feedback.

For years the Army has relayed to the Public Affairs Officer (PAO) anything that even loosely involved the media. However, most reporters are no longer content with talking only with the PAO. They can still get the basic information they need from the PAO, but for other-than-routine issues, most reporters, especially national-level reporters, want to talk with the decision makers—"the operators"—and other people who can provide insight into why the Army is doing this or what the rationale is for that. Therefore, the PAO is becoming more of a conduit between the command group and the media and less of a spokesperson for the organization.

Because there are so many reporters and their appetite is so insatiable, all Army officers—not just PAOs—must understand it is increasingly likely they will have to interact with the media. This is especially true during hostilities or when an officer is on an operational deployment. Experience teaches that the higher up the reporter is on the media pecking order—aside from establishing initial contact on an issue and defining parameters of interest—the less willing he is to talk with a military PAO.

The PAO is still the appropriate representative of the command, especially at installation level and for routine issues. However, there will be instances when the senior Army officer at the respective location must face the media's questions. This applies not only to the military. What is said and who says it is important at any time. The Exxon Corporation is still trying to regain market share it lost over a decade ago for its mishandling of information regarding the Valdez oil spill in Prince William Sound, Alaska. TransWorld Airlines was also severely damaged by its mishandling of information about the crash of its airliner off the coast of Long Island, New York. In contrast, because company executives took prominent roles in working with the media during crises, both Tylenol and Value Jet *gained* market shares after serious incidents that involved loss of life.

The Army has learned these lessons well during the last several years. It has had to deal with such

contentious issues as recruiting shortages and investigations into sexual misconduct in the training base and misconduct of senior-ranking soldiers. However, the Army has also made headlines with "good news" stories—providing support during the Atlanta Olympics and participating in the Partnership for Peace program. Stories have detailed the Army's success in Bosnia and in the Force XXI process. Fortunately, senior leaders have understood the importance of keeping soldiers, family members and the American people informed of matters involving the Army.

General Dennis J. Reimer, former Chief of Staff of the Army, understood the importance of media relations and routinely made time for local, regional and national media—in both good times and bad. The media are the key vehicle by which we reach the American people, means to our end—keeping soldiers and the American people informed. We must get past disliking a particular reporter or a certain news organization. We must remember that the Army is a "publicly owned corporation." Its stockholders are soldiers and the American people. Once we fully grasp that concept and all it implies, we will better understand how the media can actually help us reach those stockholders with our key messages.

Overcoming Barriers

Soldiers will never be the same as reporters. However, having differences does not mean we must always be adversarial. The majority of soldiers are patriotic, honest, selfless, people-oriented, mission-focused, values-based team players. They are not motivated solely by financial rewards. Ultimately, all of them are accountable for their actions.

The majority of reporters share many—not all—of these same attributes, but they have a different value system, and they do not have the same level of accountability. However, history is replete with examples of the drawbacks of gross generalizations concerning groups of people based on the acts of a few. Therefore, we should not make any widespread, all-encompassing assertions about the media—good or bad—based on experiences with only one or a handful of reporters. As is the case with soldiers, non-commissioned officers and officers, there are also substandard, average, above average and superb reporters.

It is important for senior leaders to personally get to know the reporters located near their duty locations. To be introduced for the first time should not occur during a crisis. All of us have enough experience working with people to be able to differentiate the trustworthy from the "snake oil salesman." Over time, it is likewise easy to distinguish the reporter who is always going to give the Army a fair shake from the reporter who will do whatever it takes to get on the front page or be the lead piece on the evening news. An officer should work to foster a good relationship with the former and do his best to stay away from the latter.

When dealing with the media, access is everything. You should provide access to reporters or news organizations that provide balanced coverage. The key words here are balance and access. There is, or should be, a correlation. CNN's Pentagon correspondent Jamie McIntyre has said, "Wherever commanders go, they should plan for CNN. Like the weather, we'll always be there—just another feature on the battlefield terrain." ***MR***

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Tell Soldiers First—They *Are* Our Credentials

by Master Sergeant Donald N. Carr, US Army, Retired

A few days after the Army announced its "Strike Force" plans in February 1999, a brigadier general asked a gathering of future brigade commanders if they had heard about it. When only a few hands went up, the general advised the officers to get a subscription to *Army Times* so they could "keep up on new Army policies and concepts." A public affairs officer (PAO) suggested that more immediate ways to keep up would be to access the Army's web site or subscribe to the Army News Service's electronic mail. The general's response, the PAO said, made him feel he had contradicted the senior officer, who "basically ignored my comments. We have to overcome the attitude that it's OK to expect the Army's people to pay for information they should get directly from the Army in the first place."[1]

The general's charter to the commanders would indicate that he considers *Army Times* to be *the* source of record about the Army. That is disappointing on at least two levels. First, it completely discounts the Army's own worldwide media chain of newspapers, television and electronic outlets. Second, the attitude depicts at least that leader's lack of faith in the ability of those media to make a difference to the Army's people as frontline soldiers in the campaign to reconnect the Army to the nation it serves.

Asking soldiers to turn to the commercial press for information about their Army is disturbing on another level, that of the tendency many leaders have to bristle at or resist opportunities to project the Army story through external media. A chief complaint of leaders is having to work with outside media. In their view, the media have a negative agenda. At the 1998 Cantigny Conference to discuss *The Military and the Media: Facing the Future*, then Assistant Vice Chief of Staff Lieutenant General Jay Garner said part of the problem is the belief of many inside the military that the media engage in what he called "gotcha" journalism. "The media's treatment of complex issues is largely done by unqualified people with little, if any, military training."[2]

Of course, the Army *must* be concerned with what our "authorizers"—the American public—are likely to think based on reports in the external media. Anything we do to get the story out takes on added importance in light of *Army Vision 2010*, which "will empower soldiers—not replace them. The Army of tomorrow will be . . . grounded in the values, traditions and heritage that are uniquely American."[3]

External media's reach to the American public will become increasingly important. Garner believes "media coverage is absolutely a force multiplier for military operations. Where do the American people get their perception of the military as a dedicated organization, as a professional organization? They get that from news media reports."[4] So it is by no means my contention that we "blow off" working with the media.

Tell the Army Story

My opinion is that we should improve the manner in which we include our internal audiences in telling the Army story. Support of the American people will be largely measurable by their opinion of how the Army handles itself. While Garner's point about Americans getting Army information from the media is valid, I believe it is equally important that leaders focus more readily and specifically on how the Army's people are its first line of contact with our authorizers. As one senior Army public affairs official puts it, "The Army story, or the Army view of a story, is best told by the soldiers who live it."[5] For that reason alone, we are obliged to work at least as hard to communicate the story internally as we do externally.

Enlightened leadership may understand that. Yet, where such leaders may themselves be willing to talk to external media, they often miss opportunities to include Army people in a total information strategy, particularly when the objective is to counter negative public opinion. Soldiers, civilian employees and other internal audiences also communicate with the American public. To ignore their voice—or worse, openly devalue it—is to fail to create "champions" of our own people.

Professional communicators serving our nation's industry offer useful insight into the importance of an organization's people to a total information strategy. *Army Vision 2010* suggests the Army "will team with private industry and the academic community at every opportunity as a means of assuring future vitality in the . . . power projection base of our Army."[6] A review of industry's approach to internal communications provides a way to view soldiers, employees, retirees, even families, as people who can carry the Army story to the authorizers better than can any secondary communication.

"Employees are a different breed of animal than are customers," writes Matthew P. Gonring. "Most companies haven't figured out how to bring them into the integrated marketing communications mix." Gonring says part of the problem is a "prevalent command-and-control management style that has dominated most of the 20th century [and] has dictated top-down communications with little or no feedback sought from employees." His advice: "Communications programs that recognize employees as the 'inside' audience—and ensure that they receive news first—create an environment of trust between management and the work force. And employees are able to respond to the news, and come to the aid of their company more quickly."[7]

Keep Soldiers Informed

Susan Clark McBride, director of internal communication for McDonald's Corporation, reports: "Our philosophy is that our internal audience is as important as, if not more important than, our external audience. Even before we go public with news, we keep our employees informed. There are times when it causes news leaks, but not telling employees first can cause much bigger problems than news leaks."[8] The newsletter *Working Communicator* notes the bottom line: "Remember, [employees will] get news through the grapevine and through the media. Be sure they get the facts first through honest internal communications."[9]

In what was called a breakthrough, the Army applied such thinking to its February 1999 information release about its revised policy on fraternization. In part precisely because there had been much speculation in the external media about what the new policy might be, it was important to leadership that soldiers get the story from where it most has a right to expect it—the Army. Withholding release of the fraternization policy article from the commercial media until Army media could use it first was an appropriate leadership initiative. It got the story, unfiltered by the interpretative reporting of others, to the people responsible for making the policy work.

In autumn 1997, as the Army prepared to release the findings of its senior review panel on sexual harassment, leadership took the position that the story was one soldiers were *entitled* to find in their own media. The Army News Service was brought in at the beginning of planning the report's release and given access to the panel and leaders themselves in releasing the report's findings and, more important, the Army's plans to deal with them. In September 1997, at the same time Secretary of the Army Togo West briefed the media, the internal release went worldwide to more than 200 Army newspapers to get the story first to its most important audience—the people most directly affected by and interested in the findings.

The learning point to take from release of both the fraternization and sexual harassment stories is that they were planned that way. Both cases represent a fresh, innovative and realistic approach to telling the Army story first to the internal audience; to provide constructive, mutually beneficial information to soldiers, employees and other Army people; then count on them to help project the story to the American public. Empowered military media can get the facts out right and on time. Leadership can ensure the media get it right when the media they are talking about are their own. Our media provide a long reach into the audience that should always, without exception,

be considered number one—the Army's people and their families.

Take Control of Story

"Get past your inhibitions and take control of your story," advises Army Chief of Public Affairs Major General John G. Meyer Jr.[10] He has established an Information Strategies Division at the Office of Public Affairs (OCPA) to market the Army story. The foundation of that marketing should always be to channel the story through internal media, if not first, at least simultaneously with external release. Any organization is within its right—some would say fulfilling its obligation—to provide organizational information to the internal audience first, in the name of sound business practice. It is part of the Army's business of defending the nation to ensure Army people are informed.

An *Army Crisis Communications* guide published in January 1999 is a stepping stone to that. It is a solid, everyday communications tool that provides guidance in support of crisis situations inviting the increased attention of external media. However, a message in the guide's Chapter III is more aptly written for the leaders for whom PAOs work: "One of the best ways to preclude misinformation and misperceptions is to keep soldiers, employees, retirees, family members and contract employees informed early about incidents that may affect them and their community. . . . [I]nform the internal audiences early and, whenever possible, prior to informing the news media and general public. Why? Because soldiers, employees, family members and other internal audiences are your best messengers."[11]

It is absolutely critical that Army leaders take to heart the idea that internal audiences get the complete story all the time, not just when issues reach such critical mass that the media are beating down the front gate to get the story. Indeed, as the guide says, "Well-informed, well-prepared internal audiences are essential for the success of your external communications efforts."[12] That is true every day, and leaders must ensure it is the basis of their internal information programs in all operations.

Despite our best efforts to project the Army story externally by such secondary means as outside media, the public can always be expected to put its greatest stock in what it gets directly from Army people themselves. In *Persuasive Communications*, Erwin P. Bettinghaus reports that source credibility depends on perceptions that a message's receivers impart to its senders. Whether soldier, employee, retiree or family member, mere affiliation with the Army gives its people substantial source credibility. What they tell their families, friends and others about the Army generally will carry more weight than what is reported in the media. That is why organizational communicators advise leaders to tell their internal audiences first on any story of substance "because they are your most authoritative, credible spokespersons."[13]

Tell Soldiers First

As director of News Operations in the Office of the Chief of Public Affairs, I adapted then Chief of Staff General Dennis J. Reimer's "soldiers are our credentials" maxim to a phrase that sums up the responsibility leaders have to inform their people: *tell soldiers first—they ARE our credentials*.

That phrase closes out the Army's weekly update summary to its PAOs worldwide. I choose to believe Reimer's maxim applies not just to soldiers but to all Army people, and I consider it a challenge to leaders everywhere to ensure Army people are well equipped to tell the Army story. The communications guide points out that, if properly motivated, the internal audience will help tell and support key messages in the community, both formally and informally. The guide even suggests that an easy feedback mechanism be established to enable Army people to report on questions they have been asked or rumors they have heard so they can suggest improvements to communication initiatives.

The guide suggests more ways leaders can empower their people:

- Encourage internal audiences—soldiers, civilian employees, retirees, family members and others—to participate in communication efforts and to act as advocates by informing them early in the information sharing process.
- Capitalize on the trust and credibility internal audiences have with their friends, families and the American public. For example, as their friends and neighbors learn about a crisis, they will naturally ask soldiers and employees for more information. Keep in mind that these questions will come up at church, sports practice and the grocery store.
- Encourage soldiers, retirees and employees to be your command's spokespersons at meetings and at organizations with which they are affiliated or other outreach efforts. Provide them with the appropriate tools to be effective—such as key messages, information and training.[14]

Tell the Whole Story

Leadership is discovering more and more that to tell the whole story, "warts and all," in the internal media is to give those media credibility as a reliable information source. We must be willing to say up front to our own people what we know we would have to say to members of the external press. We must be proactive and on time. We worked from that very premise with release of the sexual misconduct findings. Why can't we work that way on everything else?

The unfair and inaccurate report on 17 January 1999 by *60 Minutes* about domestic abuse in the military illustrates the point.[15] The Army and Department of Defense worked hard to help *60 Minutes* achieve balance

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in its report. Despite that help, including two background briefs with the commanding general of Fort Campbell, Kentucky, where the story focused, it became apparent that its slant would not be favorable. The report included the unfair and inaccurate claim that "No one [in the military] would talk to us because they said they couldn't count on us to be fair. . . ." That came across as a classic "no comment" that lent credence to the report's other inaccurate assertions about how the military deals with problems of domestic abuse.[16]

The problem was compounded by the fact that the Army's own people were as in the dark about the facts as anyone else. It was bad enough the public at large got wrong information; the people the story was about got it too. That could have been avoided; we knew the story was coming and that soldiers and their families were about to get bad, inaccurate news from "the media." Yet we waited until a week or more after the report to launch our own media campaign to tell the truth of the story using facts available beforehand.

Why didn't we launch a "preemptive strike"? Why didn't we get the word out in our own media on the facts we had hoped *60 Minutes* would report? The military has a solid track record in dealing with the problem of domestic abuse. More than $100 million and 2,000 people at installations worldwide are committed full time to confronting and dealing with the problem. Our longstanding position is that domestic violence is counter to military values. That is a message not just for internal communication. It needs to be available so military people will know better when they hear such inaccuracies.

Leadership can and should be more aggressive in using its own media. Doing so, of course, demands we be completely up front with internal audiences. For many leaders, the definition of "completely, fairly, accurately" means "tell only my side of the story the way I want you to tell it." It is important to accept the fact that completely, fairly, accurately is not necessarily always a good or favorable story. We must be willing to admit problems where they exist and turn them into good news by reporting them candidly in the context of what we are doing about them.

Tell the Story "On Time"

Timing is another critical element in communications planning. Perhaps the best illustration of that is that the Army, not news media, broke the "bad news" story of the sexual misconduct scandals at Aberdeen Proving Ground, Maryland. The Army set the momentum for coverage of the story, which we weathered well, by reminding Army people and the nation that the Army is an institution of values—values that tell the world who we are and what we stand for. In the process, the Army revalidated basic lessons of corporate communication strategies, including these reported in the communications guide:

- People are entitled to information that affects their lives.
- Early release of information sets the pace for resolution of the problem.
- If you wait, the story may leak anyway. When it does, you are apt to lose trust and credibility.
- You can better control the accuracy of the information if you are the first to present it.
- People are more likely to overestimate the risk if you withhold information.[17]

Speaking to a group of military people and their families in Alaska in February 1999, Secretary of Defense William S. Cohen said he views part of his job as trying to "reconnect our country to the military. Because as we've gotten smaller and more concentrated, and because the public does not see what [we] do each day, day in and day out, they tend to lose focus and perhaps even support for us. We have a growing gap between the rest of society and what some writers describe as a group of elite members of society in the military. We can't afford to let that happen. We must continue to remind our citizens of exactly the role [we] are fulfilling, the missions [we are] carrying out and how [we are] doing this with great excellence and commitment."[18]

Be "Up Front"

Therein lies a challenge to public affairs staffs and leaders. Public affairs counsel to leadership should say, "Give us the straight story, tell us like it is, and count on us not to screw it up!" We must show our commanders that we have considered the issues facing them to be leadership issues. Our counsel must be that to be up front with information on the issues—good or bad—in our own media first is to help gain the investment of our people in what leadership is doing to deal with those issues. Top Army leaders can help by emphasizing to the "green tab chain" the value of our own media.

Leadership's forthrightness in telling soldiers first will reinforce the Army's credibility before all its publics. We must be more aggressive in using our own media to tell the Army story completely. We must be bold in reporting Army news and information completely, honestly, fairly and on time. In short, our information strategy must demonstrate our loyalty to our people as well as our faith in them as the very credentials necessary to reconnect the Army to the American public. ***MR***

NOTES

1. Remarks by an anonymous public affairs officer (PAO) serving a senior Army command in Virginia in personal correspondence to me February 1999.
2. LTG Jay Garner, remarks during the 1998 Cantigny Conference on the "Military and the Media: Facing the Future," Wheaton, Illinois, 1998, as related in the conference report.
3. US Department of the Army, *Army Vision 2010,* Undated.
4. Garner.
5. LTC William Harkey, PAO, US Military Academy, West Point, New York, to me in personal correspondence February 1999.
6. *Army Vision 2010*.
7. Matthew P. Gonring, "Where Do Employees Fit Into integrated Marketing Communications?" *Journal of Employee Communication Management*, The Ragan Report, Inc., Lawrence Ragan Communications, Inc., Chicago, Illinois, <www.ragan.com/newsletter/article_JECM-842.html>, 1999.
8. Susan Clark McBride, director of Internal Communications, McDonald's Corporation, date unknown.
9. *The Working Communicator*, Lawrence Ragan Communications, Inc., Chicago, Illinois, date unknown.
10. MG John G. Meyer Jr., chief of Public Affairs, Department of the Army, remarks at the Precommand Course, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 10 February 1999.
11. Department of the Army, *Army Crisis Communications*, Office of the Chief of Public Affairs, Washington, DC, January 1999.
12. Ibid.
13. Erwin P. Bettinghaus, Betting and Michael J. Cody, *Persuasive Communication.* 3d ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1997).
14. Rodney Gray, *Internal Communications Guidelines,* Human Resources Management Consulting, <employee-communication.com.au/articles/guide.html>, date unknown.
15. "The War at Home," *60 Minutes*, CBS, 17 January 1999.
16. Department of the Army, *Commanders Take Domestic Violence Seriously*, CFSC Release #99-16, 22 January 1999; DOD, *DOD Committed to Preventing Family Violence*, American Foreign Press Service Press Release, 8 March 1999, <catguard.ca.gov/129rqw/downloads/Family_Violence.html>.
17. *Internal Communications Guidelines*.
18. Secretary of Defense William S. Cohen, remarks to US military personnel, Elmendorf Air Force Base, Alaska, 19 February 1999.